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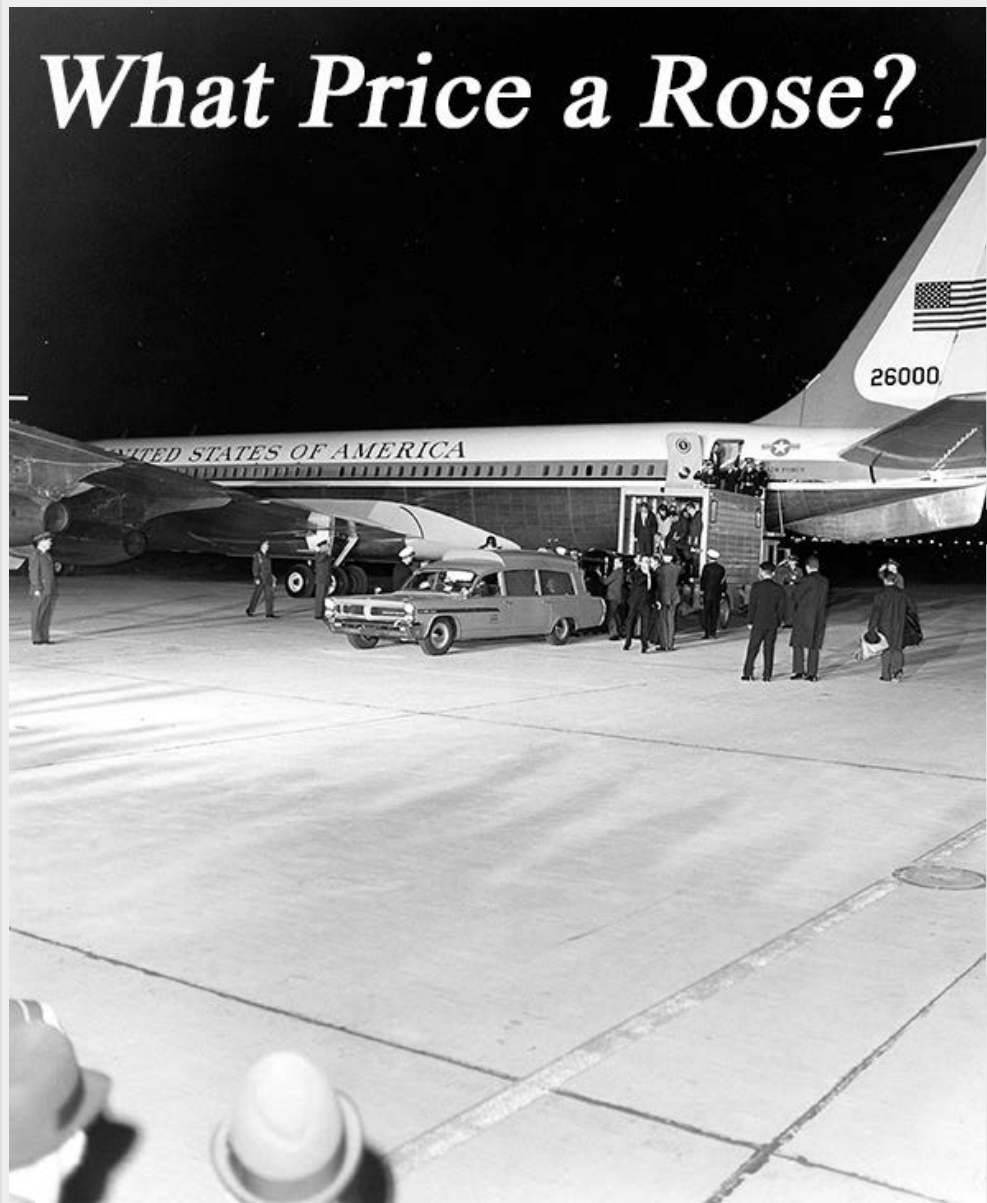
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## What Price A Rose? A Navy Physician Remembers Nov. 22, 1963

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**By Capt. James Morningstar Young, MC, USN, and edited by Andre Sobocinski, historian, U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery**



The casket bearing President Kennedy is taken from Air Force One is placed in a waiting ambulance

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Andrews Air Force base in Maryland to the Bethesda Naval Hospital for an autopsy. (John F. Kennedy and Museum/MCT)

*Editor's note: On Nov. 22, 1963, the body of President John F. Kennedy was transported from Dallas, Texas, to the National Naval Medical Center (NNMC), Bethesda, Md. where a postmortem examination[1] was performed by a team of military pathologists[2]. Some 38 years later, former Kennedy physician Capt. James Morningstar Young, MC, USN (1929-2008)[3] would recall this tragic day in an oral history interview with the [U.S. Navy Bureau of Medicine and Surgery](#) Office of Medical History[4]. The following passages are excerpted from this session.*

President John Fitzgerald Kennedy began a trip to Texas in a jubilant mood because for the first time in many months his wife was accompanying him. He was in robust health having no difficulty with his chronic back problem. Doctor Burkley[5] was relaxed and looked forward, somewhat skeptically, to the Texas trip. His immediate problems with Doctor Travell[6] were at least superficially controlled.

After a few speeches in Dallas on the morning of Nov. 22, 1963, President Kennedy took the lead car in a motorcade to the Trade Fair. Unfortunately, as usual, with the president's consent, Dr. Burkley and [Master] Chief Hendrix were following in a "VIP Bus" about six cars behind the lead car. Chief Hendrix[7] was the first in the bus to note something wrong. He saw people suddenly start falling to the ground far up ahead.

Then the motorcade began to speed forward. At this time, Chief Hendrix spoke to the local District Attorney and said "I think something's wrong." Then word was obtained that the president was at [Parkland Memorial Hospital](#). Within five minutes Dr. Burkley and his group were at the hospital. When Dr. Burkley arrived, the president was already in the emergency room. Dr. Burkley immediately evaluated the situation as hopeless as soon as he saw the gaping, bloody macerated huge wound and defect in the right posterior occipital area. He went outside to talk to Mrs. Kennedy and brought her inside for a few moments for her to view the scene. She stayed for a few moments, [and] then went outside. The two priests arrived and the Last Sacrament was given to a presumably dead man.



Admiral George Burkley, White House Physician 1963-1969 (BUMED Library and Archives)

Dr. Burkley then broached the news to Mrs. Kennedy who briefly broke down and cried. She then went inside and getting down on her knees was led in ten minutes of prayer by the two priests.

After Dr. Burkley and Mrs. Kennedy had prayed, Dr. Burkley picked up two of Mrs. Kennedy's bouquet of roses which had been stuffed into a trash can. The two beautiful American roses falling to the floor. These were the roses that Dr. Burkley picked up and put into his pocket. Mrs. Kennedy refused to leave the side of her husband and from that moment until this she has been either in the same vehicle or the same building with her husband.

In the ambulance carrying the body to the waiting [Air Force One plane](#) Dr. Burkley, who was sitting on the ambulance floor beside the unanchored casket carrying his beloved president, gave the two roses to Mrs. Kennedy. He said that since the roses had been

in the room during the entire time of the emergency treatment he thought that she might like to have them. Thus, she took the roses in her blood-caked gloves and put them into her blood-spattered jacket pocket. Mrs. Kennedy had been urged to change her clothes because

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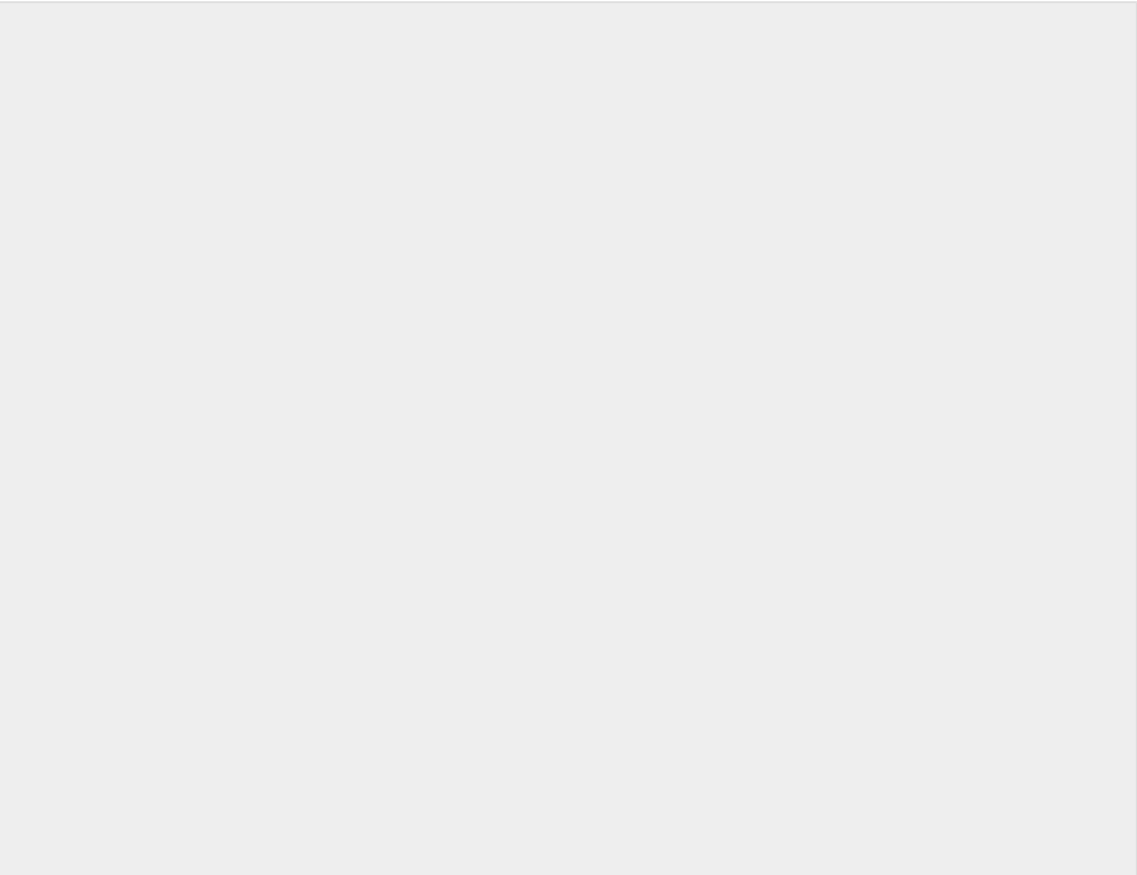
her stockings were all blood-spattered and her gloves soaked with blood, but she said, “So, I want everyone to see and remember this horrible thing.”

The president was taken to [Bethesda Naval Hospital](#) by Navy ambulance and an autopsy was to be performed. Mrs. Kennedy, Mr. O'Donnell, Mr. Powers, Mr. O'Leary[8], Dr. Walsh[9] and Doctor Burkley went to the Presidential Suite on Tower 17 at the Naval Hospital. Dr. Walsh had met Air Force One at the airport after a call had been placed by Dr. Burkley from the plane. My day had been very usual with no real problems except to arrange a quadrennial physical for Secretary Orville Freeman[10] to be held in the White House. It was about one forty and Chief Martinell[11] had just had a telephone call from Chief Mills[12] who said he just heard something on the radio about the president being shot. At the instant that Martinell[13] was hanging the phone onto the receiver Mr. McNally burst into the Dispensary and said, “The president’s been hit. Come with me, Doc.”

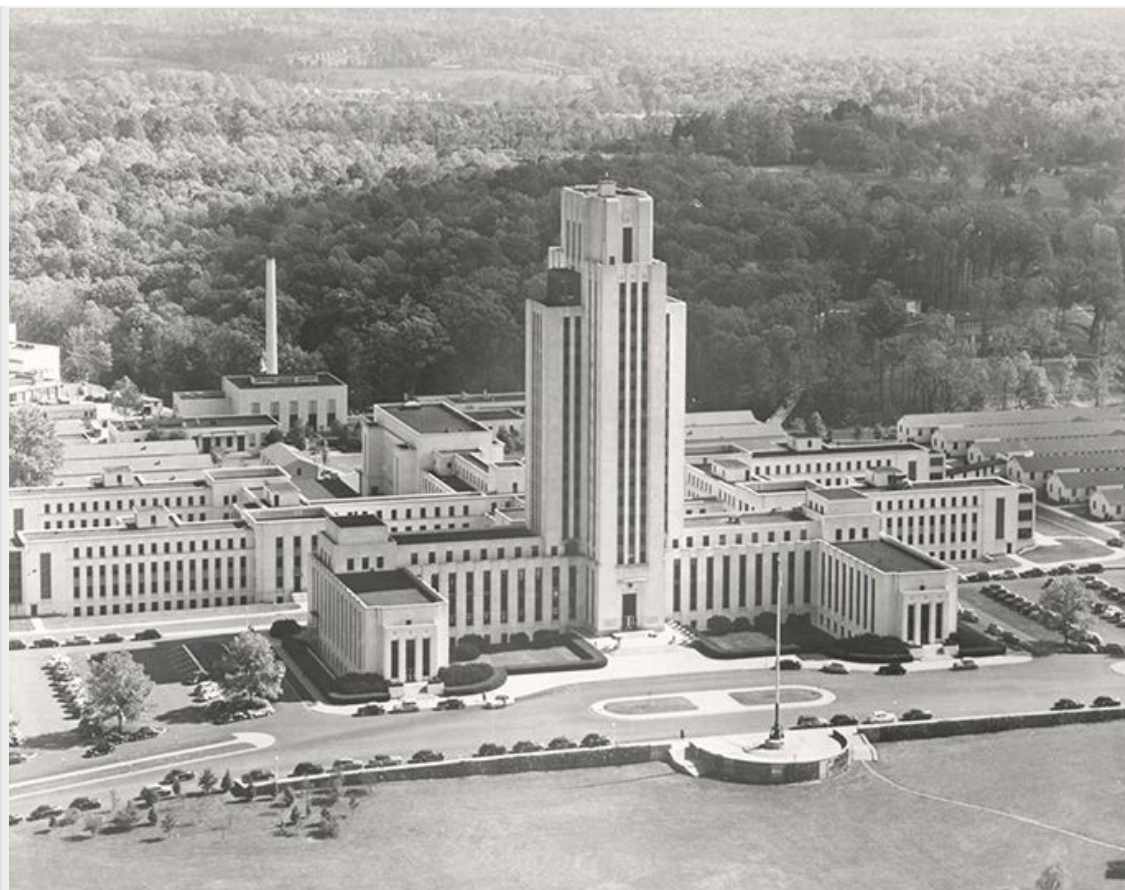
We then went to the Secret Service Office with Mister Jerry Behn[14] in the East Wing on the run, incongruous as it may seem, running through the beautiful marble and carpeted floors of the White House. It was a matter of Mr. Behn keeping a line open to Dallas and giving us snatches of information. He said “The president’s been hit, in the head I think.” At about one fifty, he said, “They say the president’s critical and that Gov. Connolly [15] has been hit too.”

At this point I turned and said “I’m afraid that’s it” and walked suddenly feeling horrified and dejected toward the door making a thumbs-down gesture. At about one fifty-five Mr. Behn said quietly, “The president’s dead.”

I went to the Dispensary, sat and stared at the horrible sad accounts coming from the television. I then began to have some information come to me about the president going to Naval Hospital Bethesda for an autopsy. Thereafter, I was in contact with the hospital notifying Capt. Canada[16] of the projected arrival time, the probability of transport by helicopter of the body, and informing him that I had procured a security guard from the Military District of Washington to stand by at the heliport in Bethesda by his request.







The Tower at Bethesda. Mrs Kennedy would wait on the 17th floor of the Tower on Nov. 22, 1963 when the autopsy took place. (BUMED Archives)

Changes then indicated that the body would be brought to Bethesda by Navy ambulance. Capt. Canada then requested the press official to help control the Press, which I attempted to obtain by a request to Mr. Hatcher[17] to no avail. After the third request to the now President Johnson's Press Secretary, I was successful. After completing my work here and talking to Dr. Burkley by phone, it was decided that we all should go home since nothing further could be accomplished here. With that, Chief Hendrix and I left with Chiefs Martinell and Mills remaining to lock up.

When we saw the body it was amazing to see that the undertaker had already done a magnificent job. He was lying smiling beautifully with a shock of unusually colored auburn red rusty brown hair glowing. His look was of utter contentment. His worries had been passed from his shoulders to others and he had gone on to a far greater reward I'm sure. In heated discussions about his maintenance of Secret Service security measures he was overheard saying that he didn't want certain things because, as he said, "I will not live in fear." He had also commented just a week prior on his New York visit when he had no motorcade in New York that "no one wants to shoot me." When seeing him, I walked to the head of the table and looked at the gaping defect in the right posterior and middle cerebral areas, which had no obvious skull covering lying anywhere in sight.

It was determined that he had been struck by two bullets, the second most probably striking him in the right occiput with the bullet lodging in behind the right orbit or at least a fragment of the bullet lodging there. With the first shot he sat upright. The shot entered about the level of the third dorsal vertebrae exiting through the trachea. It was almost certain that he died within a very short time because of the extensive brain destruction.

The scene, the setting, the background has now been laid. With all the trial and tribulation

that has come to Dr. Burkley he had one glowing irreplaceable, touching and even heart-rending triumph. With Mrs. Kennedy's obvious antagonism toward him, he had asked her onboard Air Force One about the hospital to which the body was to be sent, stating that he had no preference whatsoever where the body should go. And that he wished only for her to choose to enable him to make the arrangements. Whether it was the touching tribute of the roses or whether it was from a deeper sense of respect, admiration and faith long held by Mrs. Kennedy but not expressed, she stated that the body was to be taken to the Bethesda Naval Hospital.

There in [the hospital] tower ... the price of the roses was again paid. Mrs. Kennedy called Dr. Burkley to her about an hour after his arrival in tower ... and in a side bedroom in a very touching tender moment, she presented one of the two roses to Dr. Burkley for his undivided, devoted, undying service to his most-respected president. With this the chronicle is complete and now only history and the future can tell what price the roses.

Footnotes:

- [1] The autopsy was performed in the Navy Medical School morgue then located in what was termed the "ground floor," now the basement leading to Walter Reed National Military Medical Center Building 1 (Tower).
- [2] CDR (later CAPT) James Joseph Humes, MC, USN (1925-1997), CDR J. Thornton Boswell, MC, USN (1922-2010) and LtCOL (later COL) Pierre Antoine Finck, MC, USA (1923-).
- [3] CAPT James Young (1929-2008) served in the Navy from 1955 to 1975. He had only been appointed a White House physician several months before Kennedy's death.
- [4] This oral history was conducted in multiple sessions over the telephone by Jan K. Herman and André B. Sobocinski, BUMED Office of the Historian on 4, 10, and 17 December 2001. This excerpt was taken from an epistle CAPT Young read during the first interview. He entitled it, "What Price a Rose."
- [5] RADM (later VADM) George Burkley, MC, USN (1902-1991) became Kennedy's physician on 18 June 1963. He would later serve as President Lyndon Johnson's primary physician until January 1969.
- [6] Dr. Janet Travell Powell (1901-1997) was a pain specialist and personal physician to President Kennedy. Dr. Travell became widely known in 1961, when she became the first woman to be personal physician to a President. The appointment caused a minor stir, especially in the military, which had been providing medical care to Presidents, their spouses and their children since the 1920's
- [7] Master Chief Hendrix (??-??) was one of two hospital corpsmen with the White House Medical Unit serving as physiotherapists. Hendrix was also a registered nurse (source: Travell, Janet. *Office Hours: Day and Night-The Autobiography of Janet Travell*, 1968).
- [8] John J. "Mugsy" O'Leary (??-??) was a Kennedy family bodyguard and limousine driver.
- [9] Dr. John Walsh (1913-2000) was Jackie Kennedy's obstetrician and delivered her two children.
- [10] Orville Freeman (1918-2003) was a former governor of Minnesota (1955-1961) who served as the Secretary of Agriculture in the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations (1961-1969).

[11] HMC William Martinell (??-??) as a corpsman with the White House Medical Unit.

[12] HMC Thomas Mills (??-??) was a hospital corpsman assigned to help inspect the Kennedy limousine following the assassination.

[13] John “Jack” McNally (1930-) was one of President Kennedy’s youngest aides.

[14] Gerald “Jerry” Behn (??-??) was the Special Agent-in-Charge (SAIC) of the White House in 1963.

[15] John Connally (1917-1993), Governor of Texas, was sitting directly in front of President Kennedy in the when the shots rang out and was seriously wounded.

[16] CAPT (later RADM) Robert Canada, MC, USN (1913-1972) commanded the Naval Hospital at NNMC Bethesda, MD, from 1962-1965. From 1968 to 1969, he commanded NNMC.

[17] Andrew Hatcher (1923-1990) associate press secretary to President Kennedy.

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